

Linguistic Memoir

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I cannot remember the days of childish babbling. It seems comical to me that in fact, I do not even remember when and how did English enter my life. Relatively early I would guess, for I am not a native speaker of English. I was born in Shanghai, China. It was, and continued to be a cultural and ethnic economic center for it was one the coastline. However, this environment indeed was not enough for me to develop English proficiency steadily. It was a Chinese metropolis after all. People often spoke Mandarin Chinese since it was the official language, and for traditional districts or intimate circles, like within the family, people would talk in Shanghainese. The same principle applies to my family too; none of my family members conversed in English, only Mandarin and Shanghainese. Mandarin and Shanghainese constitute what language meant to me in those days, and English learning was merely a hobby. Speaking in English was equivalent to having an otherworldly taste in my mouth that I felt remarkably curious. Nonetheless, it was sufficient to motivate me and eventually exceed in practicing English speaking and writing. Nevertheless, let us first set aside the difference between Chinese and English and dig into the subset, the official and the dialectal: Mandarin and Shanghainese.

Like many children who were born from the 1990s onward, I had Shanghainese suppressed from the usage in daily life. Since the Chinese government established Mandarin as the official language, it was inevitable that the education system had to adapt to teaching Mandarin over local dialects. Therefore, back then the teacher in school would not interact with students in dialects. Instead, there would be courses on Mandarin pronunciation, and the Romanized phonological pinyin system in accordance. I remember that I was so comfortable with using pinyin to learn the pronunciation of a new character in Chinese that I felt troubled when I

realized the IPA table existed. Learning Mandarin pronunciation was not difficult at all, because even before the instruction on the pinyin system, the brain had already figured out a correlation between the sound and the writing of character components. A phonetic spelling system like pinyin was only a tool for identifying or learning new characters. A Chinese morpheme often consists of an optional initial consonant, an optional medial glide, a main vowel, an optional coda, and a tone distinction. (Wikipedia contributors, 2019) The unaspirated stops include [p t t̚ ts t̚s̺ t̚k̺]; the aspirated stops include [pʰ tʰ t̚sʰ t̚s̺ʰ t̚k̺ʰ]; the nasals include [m n]; the fricatives include [f s ʃ ɣ x], and the approximants include [w l ɻ~ʐ.j]. This list of phonemes shows that Mandarin Chinese acknowledges unaspirated and aspirated stops as distinctively different sounds. I had never noticed the contrast I made when I pronounce [p] and [b] differently. You might say that is impossible, but I will show you the point of confusion: the pinyin system labeled [p] as (b). If I had to learn English under the heavy influence of Mandarin only, that would be quite unfortunate. I would be missing out on all those consonants already, wouldn't I? Well no worries, Shanghainese came along with me for a reason.

Shanghainese, Shanghai dialect, or the Hu language, is a variety of Wu Chinese spoken in the central districts of Shanghai, and a dialect that I speak. Shanghainese is rich in vowels [i y ɪ ʏ eɪ ø ɛ ə ɐ a ɔ ʊ u] (twelve of which are phonemic) and in consonants. (Wikipedia contributors, 2019) Moreover, Shanghainese has voiced initials [b d g ɦ z v dz ʐ] because it belongs to the Taihu Wu subgroup. Although technically Shanghainese is not mutually intelligible with any language or dialect of Mandarin, with about 28.9% of lexical similarity, I think at least in my past knowledge the conversion was quite intuitive. With the combination of Mandarin learning in school and Shanghainese communication at home, I was blessed with

an opportunity to detect and retain the slight variations in phonemes. Of course, the phonological advantage was not the only result; there were side effects in other parts of language learning.

The grammar has always been troublesome for me, across all languages I have known. I grew up speaking and writing Standard Chinese, and Chinese was a strongly analytic language. (Wikipedia contributors, 2019) With virtually no inflectional morphemes, the sentence relies on word order and particles to express relationships between its parts. The basic word order is subject-verb-object just like English. Nouns are generally preceded by any modifiers, including adjectives, possessives and relative clauses, and verbs also generally follow any modifiers such as adverbs, auxiliary verbs and prepositional phrases. The most different point is that Chinese usually forms a sentence by stating a topic and following it by a comment, while an English sentence states the subject first and addresses the settings after.

(妈妈 给 我们 的 钱, 我 已经 买了 糖果。)
 Mom give us money I already buy candy
 ('As for the money that Mom gave us, I have already bought candy with it.')

An English speaker would probably think that if the sentence was “I have already bought candy with the money that Mom gave us.” I would agree with that too, but this example is a simple one. The problem had to do with how one thinks. I had to change the way of how my brain was soft-wired, to my own belief. Thus the weak version of Sapir-Whorf hypothesis appeals to me: linguistic categories and usage only influence thought and decisions. I often fell in the same circle of having weird sentence structures that perplexed other people, and I never knew why. I had only thought about the phonetic parts of languages and practiced on pronunciations when I was learning by listening to English songs. There was that one thing I

struggle to overcome. The coherent sentence structure, the fluidity between paragraphs, and the clarity of a paper, all of these were the extensions of the thought process, the way of a mind.

Even now I still carry this idiosyncrasy in my language use. I cannot guess how much more can I adapt my linguistic cognition, but probably this memoir already manifests these minutiae of my lingering, topic-oriented logic. All I could do is to express my admiration toward the power of language. I am molded by the exact thing I formulated. Were my voyage in language learning and thought process not an instance of “I think, therefore I am?”

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